

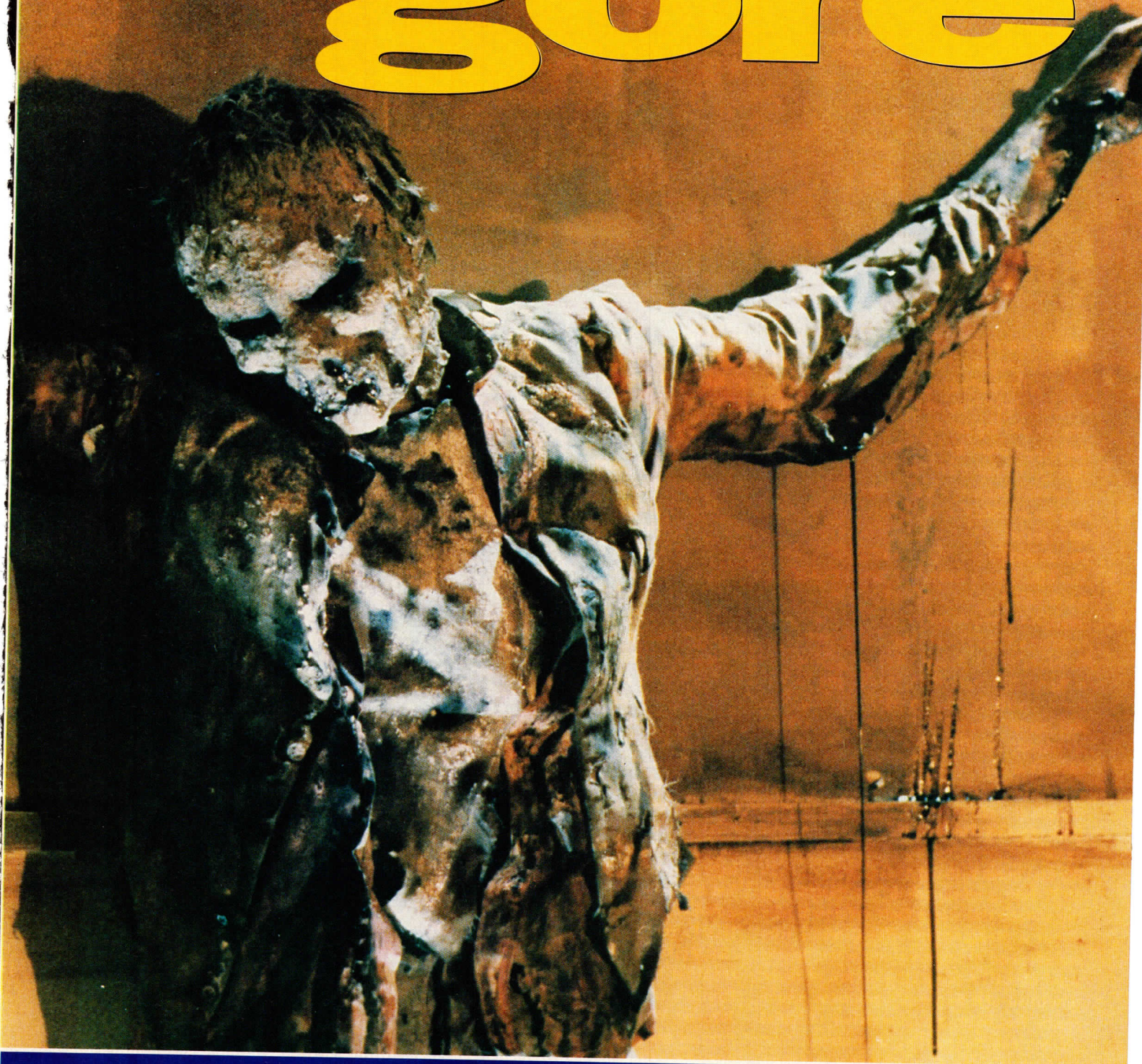
The zombie movies of Lucio Fulci are definitely not for the squeamish. But that doesn't bother our resident ghoul Allan Bryce, who looks *Beyond The House By The Cemetery* in *The City Of The Living Dead* and digs deep into the mouldy career of Italy's master of maggot mayhem.

When you're sitting around nattering about nasties and the conversation turns to the finer intellectual points of Italian zombie movies, one name that always comes up like a bad meal is Lucio Fulci, the sultan of spaghetti shock who brought us that classic gut-cruncher, *Zombie Flesh Eaters*. It was Lucio who spearheaded the growth of Italian zombie-cannibal flicks in the early 80s and he is still regarded by many as the main man in the field.



The ironic thing is that nobody in their right mind could make a case for Fulci being a great filmmaker. It's just the opposite, in fact. His pictures are usually very poorly written, woodenly performed and clumsily directed. Their sole saving grace is the gore content, which is usually as high as Oliver Reed's bar bill. In fact some of Lucio's bloodthirsty offerings literally knock your eyes out (and those of you who've seen the splinter-in-the-eyeball scene in the uncut *Zombie Flesh Eaters* will know exactly

asta masta of gore



what I mean!)

Because of this, most of Fulci's ghastly gore epics have been strongly censored in the UK. The original cinema release of *Zombie Flesh Eaters*, for example, was trimmed of the notorious squished eyeball sequence, plus the more explicit shots of zombies feasting on human entrails. Other Fulci movies to suffer a similar fate at the censor's scissors include *The House By*

The Cemetery, *City Of The Living Dead*, and *The Beyond*, all of which are being released to sell-through this month by our mates at VIPCO. We'll investigate these pictures in greater detail later in the piece. First let's delve into Fulci's background to see what kind of chap makes movies like these for a living...

Lurid Lucio didn't set out to make gore movies. He just sort of stumbled into it. He

was born in Rome on June 17th, 1927 and studied at the capital's Experimental Film Centre with teachers like Antonioni and Visconti. Fulci claims he passed the oral exam that got him admitted by being brave enough to tell the great Visconti that he thought he had borrowed shots in *Ossessione* from Jean Renoir films.

He then embarked on a brief career as a journalist before entering the weird world of



because of its intense gore sequences (provided by the talented make-up man, Giannetto De Rossi).

These included the aforementioned skewering of Olga Karlatos' eyeball on a splinter of wood - an almost unwatchable scene - and quite a number of gory flesh feasts, shot in traditional cannibal movie fashion, with sheep's innards being enthusiastically devoured by scarlet-faced zombies. There was even one incredible scene where the sexy Aurette Gay went skin diving and was confronted by the unusual sight of an underwater zombie

Italian commercial cinema in 1953, where his first assignment was as screenwriter and cinematographer for Mauro Bolognini's *Ci Troviamo In Galleria*. After this his sterling efforts at writing numerous low grade comedies for Alberto Sordi and Toto got him promoted to assistant director on Marcel Lherbier's *Last Days Of Pompeii* and he eventually made his full fledged directorial debut in 1959 with a crime melodrama called *The Thieves*.

The 60s were a busy time for our Lucio as he dabbled in all sorts of movie genres, trying his hand at comedies (*The Maniacs*), westerns (*The Brute And The Beast*), spy thrillers (*002 Secret Agents*), science fiction (*002 Operation Moon*) and finally horror, with *Perversion Story*, (a 'magical and unreal' detective thriller starring Elsa Martinelli) and *The Long Night Of Exorcism* (about a murderous priest). This was followed by *Beatrice Cenci* (1969), a historical saga dosed with torture scenes that remains Fulci's favourite of his own movies.

His first brush with out-and-out gore came in 1977 with a movie called *The Psychic*. On the surface this was a fairly ordinary thriller about a medium (Jennifer O'Neill) who experienced strange visions when deaths were about to occur. It was full of those repetitive and frequently pointless shock zooms that seem a regular fixture of Italian cinema and the plotting was strictly from the bottom of the 'B' movie barrel. But there was one thing that stuck in the minds of viewers: the intense gore scene where a character committed suicide by jumping off a cliff. Her face was ripped off and her head literally exploded as it hit the side on the way down!

This seemed to go down a storm with audiences, so Lucio injected even more gratuitous gore into his next picture, a bloodthirsty gangster flick called *The Naples Connection* (1979) which detailed

graphic Mafia tortures. He also put a fair bit of gruelling gore into the 1979 thriller *Schizoid*, which featured a scene in which some dogs were chopped to pieces. Fulci later claimed that the sequence was so realistic that effects ace Carlo Rambaldi had to produce the mechanical models used in it to stop him being sent to jail for cruelty to animals! Italian censorship was relaxing in the late 70s and Lucio seized the moment and entered the fear fray in a big way with his next film, *Zombie 2*, an unofficial sequel to George Romero's hugely successful *Dawn Of The Dead* (which had been released in Italy under the title of *Zombie*). The simple storyline had heroine Tisa Farrow (Mia's sister) joining reporter Ian McCulloch to travel to the remote tropical island of Matoul in search of Farrow's missing father, scientist Richard Johnson. When they get there they have to fight for their lives against an army of flesh-munching Conquistador zombies, who can only be destroyed by having their brains blown out!

Explained Fulci: 'I wanted to make a free-form fantasy, based on horror sensations and hinged on fear. When we finished shooting *Zombie 2*, I said we had just made a horror film classic, without knowing it.' He was right. Though not anywhere near as well made as the Romero original, *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (as the film was known in the UK) was an instant hit all round the world, solely



munching on a shark!

The film's huge financial success proved that there was an audience out there for splatter movies and Fulci decided he should go all out to tap into it. And so it was that he continued the zombie theme of his earlier hit in the 1980 *City Of The Living Dead* (aka *The Gates Of Hell*), an intriguing mixture of H.P. Lovecraft, Edgar Allan Poe and Italian gore.

It begins in a Massachusetts cemetery, where a priest commits suicide, thus opening the gates of hell and allowing a zombie army of those burned at the stake centuries ago to return to seek horrible revenge on mankind. The only way to prevent the world from coming to an end is for heroic journalist Christopher George to join forces with psychic Katherine MacColl and rip out the evil priest's heart as detailed in the Book of Enoch!

Among the stomach-churning highlights featured here are a sequence where a girl

who witnesses the priest's suicide is forced to vomit up her intestines (effects by Franco Rufini, because Gianetto De Rossi was busy). You might be interested to know the sort of commitment Fulci expects from his performers: the actress involved in the bowel-vomiting scene was forced to swallow - and then regurgitate - the tripe of a freshly slashed lamb!

Amazingly this lengthy scene wasn't trimmed by the censor when the movie went out to UK cinemas in the early 1980s. A scene that was removed showed a retarded boy (John Morghen) having a drill thrust

through his head. The widescreen version of this movie (which is about to be released on the VIPCO label) is exactly the same as the cinema version and therefore is also missing the drill scene.

There were signs with this movie that Fulci was starting to develop some talent as a horror director, most notably in the tense sequence where the heroine has been buried alive and the hero attempts to dig her up. Rather unwisely he chooses to employ a pickaxe to do it with and there are a few mean jolts as the blade keeps puncturing the wood of the coffin, inches

from the terrified woman's face!

City was followed up by *The Beyond*, a film which many regard to be as close to a masterpiece as anything that Fulci has yet produced. The director is the first to admit that this particular movie is virtually plotless, but says he always planned it that way so he could concentrate on the gore set-pieces. What little story there is, is remarkably like Michael Winner's *The Sentinel*, telling of a hotel that stands on one of the seven entrances to hell. Katherine MacColl stars as the inheritor of the place and British actor David Warbeck (who appeared in Fulci's earlier chiller, *The Black Cat*) plays a doctor helping MacColl investigate her fears of ghostly possession.

The effects here are plentiful and

frequently disgusting. Heads explode, a guide dog rips out the throat of his owner, eyeballs pop and in an impressive pre-credits sequence a warlock is beaten with chains, tortured, nailed to a wall and burned with acid. Fulci himself also contributes a brief cameo as a librarian, prefacing a memorable murder sequence where somebody is attacked by pipe-cleaner spiders and stripped of their flesh.

The make-up work is by scriptwriter Dardano Sacchetti and Giorgio Mariuzzo and a lot of it was far too realistic for the British censor, who chopped three minutes out (including a lot of the prologue and the dog attack). The VIPCO re-release is, once more, substantially the same as the cinema release. It's still cut, but a lot less so than the severely scissored Elephant Video version many British horror fans have wasted their money on.

Fulci's next zombie picture was made the same year (1981) and went under the title of *The House By The Cemetery*. There was only one zombie in this one, but he was a pretty mean customer: the malevolent Dr Freudstein (Giovanni de Nari) was a macabre medico who dabbled in strange forces and subsequently returned from the grave as a mosaic of sewn-together corpses, sustained by human blood - most of which comes from the folk who are unfortunate enough to rent the house of the title.

'It began as an updated, literal translation of Henry James' *Turn Of The Screw*' says Fulci, 'and was to be called just *Freudstein*.



But it became a study of what constitutes adult normality, as opposed to the imaginary world of childhood morality.' The horrid happenings in the movie are mainly seen through the eyes of a child and as such it has a Grimm's Fairy Tale atmosphere about it that is at times quite compelling.

It also has quite a lot of gore, mainly in the final scenes where the zombified Freudstein really gets into his sadistic stride. Once again the censor stepped in, cutting 4 minutes and 11 seconds from the cinema release and shortening the excruciating slow-motion death of an estate agent and some of the cannibalistic mayhem of the climax. Then it was trimmed of another 34 seconds by the notorious Elephant Video, who tried to second guess the censor by cutting out all the gore before submitting the movie (in fact they cut so much it was a wonder it didn't get a 15!). VPCO are currently conferring with the censor in the hopes of restoring some of the missing footage. The release date will be announced as soon as the BBFC come to their decision on this.

House was the final film in Fulci's zombie quartet. Afterwards he went on to make the ghastly *New York Ripper*, a movie so violent and sadistic and just plain 'nasty' that it will surely never be released in the UK. Other Fulci films of recent years include a couple of softcore sex flicks (*The Devil's Honey*,

The Ghosts Of Sodom), a few failed horror thrillers (*Aenigma*, *Manhattan Baby*, *Murder Rock*) and the daft sci-fi opus, *Conquest*. Fulci's attempt to return to the zombie sub-genre (with the mediocre *Zombie 3*, unreleased in the UK), also proved to be a box-office loser.

One of his latest pictures, *Nightmare Concert*, sums up his career in a nutshell. It's about a low-rent gore movie director, played by Fulci himself, who is desperate to break out of the exploitation mould, but is doomed to keep supplying shock sensations to sick, thrill-seeking goremongers. It features a young boy's head being chainsawed off, an opera soprano being savagely beaten up in mid-aria, a woman strangled with piano wire and a homicidal maniac who pokes people's eyes out and rips the faces off nubile starlets. There's even a wheelchair-bound zombie!

Nightmare Concert seems a fitting swansong to Lucio's career and maybe there's an element of truth in the fact that he wants to be doing gentler movies. But the grand old man of Italian horror doesn't intend to retire just yet. Despite the health problems (to do with a heart complaint) that forced him to abandon directing *Zombie 3* halfway through, he has recently produced *White Fang*, *Voices From The Deep* and *The Cat In The Brain* and is currently working on a picture called *The*





Door To Evil, starring Stagefright's Barbara Cupisti.

It's doubtful whether we'll get the chance to see many of these pictures in the UK and if we do you can bet the BBFC will have had a hack at them first. But never mind, because in the meantime - thanks to VIPCO - you can legally get your sweaty mitts on those Fulci classics, *Zombie Flesh Eaters*, *City Of The Living Dead*, *The Beyond* and *The House By The Cemetery*. Go on, invite a zombie into your household today - anyone for baked beings on toast?

